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RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: CHANGING THE FACE OF HISTORY

*«All things are subject to
interpretation.
Whichever interpretation prevails
at a given time is a function of power
and not truth»*

Friedrich Nietzsche

This article is dedicated to the analysis of publications on the events surrounding Russian Revolution, which differed from the traditional dogmatic Soviet interpretation. Special attention has been paid to the interconnectedness of the political, social, economic and mental factors during the critical moments of the twentieth century.

The author argues that as soon as the incredibly important ideological role of the Russian Revolution has vanished with the fall of the Soviet Union and a lengthy period of totalitarian dogma in historiography has come to an abrupt end, historians, economists, publicists and journalists have changed their views upon the events of 1917 quite drastically, finally getting the opportunity to publish a great amount of sources, which gave a dramatically different impression of the Revolution.

Key words: *Russian Revolution, historical materialism, socialism, nineties, sources, Russian Empire, Soviet Union, Russia.*

Introduction

As the world watches the latest events unfold in Ukraine where Russia and ‘the West’ have clashed again, it is time to rethink a lot of issues which lay at the origins of this situation. One of such issues is the role of the historical representation of the past, which undoubtedly influences and forms our opinions today. To get an idea of it, I will take a closer look at the publications concerning the collapse of the Russian empire during the turbulent period after the fall of its successor.

The subject of the Russian Revolution is still relevant, as it has led to a dramatic change in geopolitics, which still echoes today. Its historical representation shows the still existing fundamental differences between Russia and Western Europe. Moreover, the Russian Revolution perfectly exemplifies how the past is manipulated and shaped in order to serve the present needs of the regime. The changes brought about by the '90 fully reveal this side of historiography.

Purpose

So, what does the changing image of the Russian Revolution in historical publications testify about the geopolitical, cultural and mental developments in Russia during the '90s? In this question Russian Revolution only serves as an example to reveal a much more complex problem. To solve it we first of all need to know how the Revolution was looked upon when it had just happened and how these sources were used later, especially in the Soviet times. The first part of the article provides fundament for further research. Without this information it is impossible to perceive the turning point which came in the '90s. The first section of the second part will be dedicated to the actual problem: the actual changes in historiography. Furthermore, I have paid special attention to the basic information about the publications and their forewords by the leading (Russian) historians of the '90 in order to be able to analyze them.

During the research, I have faced a constant dilemma when trying to analyze historiography and providing background information at the same time – which is also a part of

historiography and needed to be analyzed in its turn as well. This is probably what Nietzsche meant by claiming that the truth does not exist: the interpretation problem and a ridiculous search for objectivity. Apparently, this dilemma is unsolvable, so the only solution is to reckon with the different backgrounds and viewpoints of the authors.

Results

In my opinion, historiography, as well as history, starts at the sources. The Russian Revolution is luckily well documented. Numerous diplomats and revolutionaries, who were in the center of events when the Russian Revolution broke out, as well as journalists and observers, who were witnessing it, left their first-hand accounts of the revolution. Some of them – mostly the opponents of the revolution, saw it merely as a dangerous escapade even after the Bolsheviks have already come to power, while enthusiast socialists quickly became agitated and saw it as a great milestone in world history. American journalist John Reed, author of the book *Ten Days that Shook the World*, was one of such enthusiasts. In the foreword for his account, he wrote: ‘Whatever others may think of bolshevism, the Russian Revolution is, without a doubt, one of the greatest events in the history of mankind [...]. Just the way historians search for the smallest details about the Paris Commune, they will want to know everything about the events in Petrograd in November¹ 1917’ [1, 12]. He acknowledges as well, that his sympathies were not neutral – and indeed, the American edition of the book was published with the fervent foreword from Lenin himself, and the Russian one with a note from Krupskaya.

Mikhail Rodzianko, an outstanding Russian statesman and politician², accounts of the revolution from yet another angle in his *Collapse of the Empire* – personal notes, where he describes the events within the Russian government and how Duma, later the Provisional Committee, tried to save the Russian Empire from collapse and the Bolshevik Revolution. It is obvious that such a source would have never been published or used for research in the Soviet times. So it is even not the book itself which tells us a story, but its background. *Collapse of the Empire* was published in 1998. This edition has two forewords which deserve special attention in Chapter II of this research. It also has two much earlier editions which date from the early twenties.

Generally, all sources concerning the Russian Revolution can be divided into four categories: Western anti-revolutionary, Western pro-revolutionary, Russian pro-Soviet ones and the group which actually came to the fore only in the nineties – writings by those who opposed the revolution. The selection of these primary sources can provide a powerful basis for a research from *any* viewpoint regarding the revolution, because they are often openly subjective as the two examples show. That is why it is essential to consider the character, origin and background of these fundamental sources before starting own research, and especially when looking at the historiography regarding this subject. Still, this is only one of the components. Another important and often determinant factor deeply imprinted into historiography is the influence of ideology and the regime, which is in power at a given moment – and that leads us to the topic of the Soviet Union policies regarding science.

Soviet historical practice has been analyzed and its flaws were exposed only after (or close to) the fall of the Soviet Union [2, 22]. Therefore, lacking my own experience and time to study a huge amount of Soviet literature, I had to rely on historiographical literature which was written in the nineties – and that is actually the main period in question. So the 90’s historiography now serves as a tool and ultimate subject of the research at once.

Originality

First of all, it is necessary to outline the general traits of historical practice in the Soviet Union. Communism, socialism, worship of Marx and the love of Hegel (two great positivists) – all of this meant that the doctrine of historical materialism was predominant in historiography of

¹ Old style: October

² Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko – (1859–1924) State Councillor and chamberlain of the Imperial family, Chairman of the State Duma and one of the leaders of the February Revolution of 1917, during which headed the Provisional Committee

that time [3, 119–135]. It can be described as an economically and sociologically oriented positivist approach³ built on the Marxist – Leninist methodology [2, 24; 4].

Furthermore, it almost goes without saying that the majority, if not all, of the publications were state-controlled. This control was especially harsh under Stalin, when any deviant opinion could lead to Gulag imprisonment or capital punishment.

The Soviet censorship was rigorous. The main figure within history as a science associated with such control was academician I. I. Minz. Member of Politburo and a holder of high scientific offices, Minz was an orthodox historian who controlled Soviet historiography for decades (approx. 1949–1972). Those who gave voice to dissenting opinions were instantly ‘shot off’ by his devastating criticism. A team of scientists under his leadership monopolized publication and editing of the Russian revolutions-related materials [5, 4], which has largely formed the Soviet image of the Russian Revolution as we know it, with a special place for the Great October Revolution.

The second half of the 50’s – begin 60’s, however, known as the ‘Khrushchev thaw’ has brought certain revival of historical practice. It was marked by an intensified interest in theory and methodology of social sciences. The censorship was loosened and A. Gurevich describes this period as a time of lively scientific discussions and a flow of fresh publications. The second such ‘renaissance’ will only come in the nineties. It is debatable though, which of the two periods is more meaningful to historiography [2, 22].

Did the fall of the Soviet Union bring any changes to historiography? Did it break with the past in order to revive old values? And how does it relate to the previous 70 years of development? To give an idea about the state of Russian historiography of the nineties in general, and the developments in Russian Revolution studies in particular, I would like to describe it using the aforementioned example: the two forewords to the *Collapse of the Empire* by M. Rodzianko.

The first one is written in 1990 by Valeriy Ganichev – writer, Doctor of Historical Sciences, professor and chairman of the Union of Russian Writers. All this titles indicate a successful, well-recognized and authoritative person. His Soviet past was also rather bright: in the 60’s he held a leading position at the famous Soviet publishing house *Molodaya Gvardiya* (*Young Guard*).

Ganichev sharply criticizes the Soviet historical practice: ‘*Until recently we, Soviet people, knew about the collapse of the Russian Empire only from the publications by academician Minz.*’ (whereupon follows the criticism of Minz). Moreover, he also attacks the Soviet methodology with its ‘*vulgar socio-economical positions*’ and ‘*concealment of a whole range of the known facts*’ [5, 4–5]. What is more important, Ganichev also constructively tries to analyze these mistakes of the past and draws attention to modern historiographical problems caused by the decades of historical distortion. These arguments serve as an explanation of the importance of Rodzianko’s notes. They help the readers to understand how and why did the Russian Empire collapse and gain new fresh insights which were very much needed at that time, as ‘*the 20th century is nearing to its end and we still don’t know the truth about the most radical, cruel and failed revolt in our history*’ [5, 5–6].

The scientific approach of Piontkovsky is more constructive, as the Russian Revolution was his speciality. He says that notes are subjective material per definition and explains Rodzianko’s perspective, gives characteristics of his work and analyses the context in which they were written. This information organically supplements the first article by Ganichev. These forewords create a good impression of historiography, as both Ganichev and Piontkovsky strive for objectivity. So these two authors must have been close colleagues, or were they? The biggest surprise is that this text was written in 1927. It contains no criticism of Soviet science, true, but I dare to assume that in 1927 it was not yet formed as such. The purges and mass repressions of ‘counterrevolutionary elements’, though, were gaining momentum – and this article is clearly

something that would have been described as an antirevolutionary heresy. Piontkovsky was arrested and shot in 1936, rehabilitated in 1956. The time of his rehabilitation coincides with Krushtchev's secret speech exposing the Cult of personality and the beginning of cultural revival, as described in the previous paragraph.

So, the decades which separated Piontkovsky and Ganichev have clearly brought about some changes, which could literally mean the difference between life and death. Looking further through the 90's publications, it is very difficult not to notice that there appeared dozens of articles about 'the Whites', Mensheviks, and all those figures of the Russian Revolution who were condemned and obliterated during the Soviet era. A lot of sources were published. Such is, for example, the collection of articles and memoirs *In the First Person*, intended for the broad public. Here one can find writings by Denikin and captain Vranghel, protocols of Kolchak's speeches and other 'revolutionary' material. The interest in the October Revolution faded.

We can get a similar picture by looking through the archives of the biggest Soviet, and after that Post-Soviet historical academic journal *Questions of History*, which, remarkably, has started out in the twenties as a Bolshevik magazine and ended up publishing devastating critics towards the Soviet regime and biographies of White officers in the nineties.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that it was once and for all broken with the Soviet past, even if we ignore the ever-present proponents of the Soviet system. Many semi-conscious beliefs left intact. Such is the case with the complicated relationship with the West, for example. Even now that the Cold War has ended, 'the West' is still seen as the Russia's 'other' and America remains an enemy or at least a cultural antagonist for the overwhelming majority of Russians (though there are some exceptions to this rule, mainly among the intellectual elite). S. Kara-Murza, an influential Russian political philosopher, sociologist and historian, in his book *Historical Materialism and the East-West Problem* criticizes Soviet scientific methodology and the intellectual degradation of the masses as a result of communist indoctrination. He states, that Marxism was perverted by Bolsheviks and exposes many flaws of historical materialism [6, 126–131]. His conservative isolationist political views, however, sharply contrast with his progressive scientific approach. Kara-Murza speaks of globalization as a threat to Russian civilization. He also stresses the difference between Russia and the West: '*Our sincere democrats, wishing only the best for their co-citizens, dream of turning Russia into an open liberal society – a part of the West. The West itself, however, doesn't, and never will, want to have such a 'relative', and that's why it hatefully broke all the ties with Byzantium to become what it is now*'. His conclusion is that even if the Russians wanted to become a part of the West, it would never be possible, because the division between us is much stronger than just the Stalin's 'iron curtain' [6, 10]. This book was published in 2002, but is undoubtedly shaped by Russia's chaotic search for political, ideological and cultural values, its choice of new direction during the nineties.

So, obviously, thanks to the new unrestrained freedom of the nineties many of the past convictions and values imposed from above were fundamentally rethought, while others remained and became even stronger. How can we account for these developments and what forces drove historiography during this period?

First, let us sum up the historiographical developments regarding the Russian Revolution. There is no lack of sources about the events of 1917 and the period, which preceded them. Most of these sources are openly subjective and this is very understandable. We can easily account for this subjectivity by looking at the background of the authors: Trotsky was a militant communist, who called for a world proletarian revolution, but fell into disfavor as he posed a real threat to Lenin and Stalin; Rodzianko's perspective lies within Duma and the Russian government, Denikin and Vranghel were White officers... and so on. This extra information does not interfere with scientific research, but rather complements it. Any scientific research can be distorted though, by deliberately choosing only one point of view and eliminating all sources, which contradict or simply do not support this dogma. An outcome of such research is not its goal, but a pre-determined starting point.

The science during the Soviet era was placed within the Soviet dogmatic ideology of communism and was methodologically limited to a primitive positivist approach. The early 60's have temporarily brought some life into this matter. Nevertheless, the progressive historians of this period did not really challenge the system. They only rejected the Stalinist vulgar simplifications, after the Party has tasked them with doing so. This was an important step in historiography, but it was still being done within the boundaries of the Marxist historical concept [2, 22].

Thus, the dramatic but much needed changes happened only in the nineties. This was a time of a great cultural, mental and geopolitical shift, which comes down to the fact that communism has died off as an ideology and the Soviet Union has reached a final stage of deterioration. It seems now the things just could not go on as they were. The fall of the Berlin wall, breakaway of the former Ostblok and the Soviet Republics as well as the birth of Russian Federation, which are now seen as the milestones of Contemporary History were no sudden events. At their foundation one can find a solid structural basis which reaches with its roots the Second World War, or, possibly, even to the Revolution itself.

An average Russian during the nineties found himself in a cultural and power vacuum. It was a period of unprecedented freedom and therefore chaos, during which people hastily sought for a new course and a set of values.

There was a pressing need for a deep scientific redefinition of the Soviet history as the ideological restrictions concerning the information about the past were lifted and everyday life was dominated by instability and ideological confusion. In 1989 for the first time in decades the people have got a chance to freely express their opinions and protest against the Party. The elections of the members of USSR Parliament have become a powerful impulse for the politicization of common people [7, 558]. These and other factors have radically changed the popular attitude toward history. The danger of this period was though that the Soviet regime was now turned into a scapegoat [8, 10]. No matter what went wrong or caused frustration, it was blamed onto it, which is a classic example of a search for easy solutions. Therefore, one should still be careful when searching for an unbiased opinion on Soviet history as well as the Russian Revolution.

Finally, it is necessary to differentiate between the February and October revolutions. The second one was ecstatically celebrated during the Soviet era. In the nineties the views radically changed and the attention was now turned towards the February Revolution, because it used to be a sort of taboo and didn't get much attention before. Besides, it is a powerful and romanticized symbol of failed democracy, just as the events 1848 are for Europeans. It is also not difficult to see an intriguing parallel between the fall of USSR and instability of nineties on one hand, and the fall of the Empire in 1917 followed by the time of troubles on another.

Conclusion

Summing up, in the nineties the people have faced freedom, instability and the fall of the old ideology. The mindset of the common people has definitely changed. The changes should be somewhat relativized though, as the protest against the Soviet regime and deviating opinions have always existed, they have just never been openly expressed.

Historians have got a chance to carry out an unrestrained research and have gained access to previously forbidden materials, such as archives and sources, and they have eagerly used the chance. That is why we encounter dozens of publications about the Russian Revolution, which offer us a completely new, somewhat romanticized view on the events of 1917. These publications are built up on the writings of all those who have been condemned by the Soviet regime and clearly show preference for the February Revolution. They breathe nostalgia but also reflect the instability of the political situation of the nineties to some degree when there was no power and no restraints, which also means that the social and political course, along with the guidelines for cultural and historical values were yet to be defined – and they eventually were.

Now, anno 2014, we face a new country, Russian Federation, that has coined up a new ideology under Putin. As the media are increasingly controlled by the government and a new

wave of propaganda is gaining momentum, does that mean a reversal trend in historiography? Will it become an instrument of indoctrination once again? The eagerness with which Putin operates historical terms might raise concerns about that [9].

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ЖОВТНЕВА РЕВОЛЮЦІЯ: МІНЛИВЕ ОБЛИЧЧЯ ІСТОРІЇ

Пропонована стаття присвячена аналізу комплексу публікацій в яких з відмінних від традиційної радянської історіографії позицій висвітлювалися події і явища суспільно-політичного ландшафту Російської Імперії в часи її краху. Приділена увага взаємозв'язку чинників політичного, економічного, соціального та ментального характеру в зламні періоди на протязі ХХ сторіччя.

Наголошується той факт, що як тільки надважлива ідеологічна роль Жовтневої Революції відпала в зв'язку з розпадом Радянського Союзу і тривалий період панування тоталітарної доктрини істмату несподівано обірвався, погляди громадсько активної частини суспільства, засобів масової інформації, науковців та публіцистів на сутність подій 1917-го року в дуже короткий час кардинально змінилися, випускаючи на поверхню досі відсутню в історіографії ностальгію по дореволюційним часам і величезну кількість ще не опублікованих джерел стосовно даної теми.

Ключові слова: *Жовтнева Революція, істмат, тоталітаризм, дев'яності, джерела, Російська Імперія, Радянський Союз, Росія.*

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